

WILLIAM C. WHITNEY  
BRINGS TO LIGHT

## HIDDEN WISDOM OF "THE HERMIT OF ZOAR."

Delightful Observations of a Literary Recluse That Are Now Published for the First Time.

## WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

In these days of imitative writing and literary hazing one seldom comes upon a volume like "The Hermit of Zoar," a book of Alexander Gunn, which is printed by Mr. William C. Whitney and comes from the press of De Vinne & Co. It is the revelation of a rare personality, unfolded in a unique style and provocative of none but pleasant thoughts.

As it is printed for private circulation among the friends of the late Mr. Gunn there is nowhere in it any formal recommendation or explanation. It is intended for those who already know something of the Hermit and his quiet home. Those outside that circle who happen come by the book must make up of surmises here and there in the text the frame of the charming story.

This, however, is not difficult, for one recalls that some time in November last news telegrams from Cleveland announced that former Secretary William C. Whitney had gone to Zoar, in Ohio, to bury his friend, Alexander Gunn, whose remains had been brought from Nuremberg, in Germany, where he died a month or so before.

The name of the man and the place were new. The great light of publicity that beat on the life and public services of one of these friends had never touched the other, and he remained in the shade all his days. The funeral occasioned no little curiosity at the time.

Since then accounts of Zoar and the Zorites have been printed, from which we learn that, some time about 1817, there settled at what is now Zoar, in Ohio, a colony of Swabians, under the leadership of a man named Brimley. They had been driven from their homes across the sea by the exactions of taxation and tyrannical conscriptions. They settled in what was then a wilderness and their descendants had since maintained the Commune.

Farming and raising stock on the system they brought with them, they were now, with their medieval farming methods, a very anachronism in the midst of the modern civilization of their adopted State. But of Alexander Gunn nothing. In death, as in life, he continued out of the reach of the common eye.

HERMIT'S BOOK ARTISTICALLY  
RAISES THE VEIL.

But now comes the volume printed by Mr. Whitney for private circulation among the lifetime friends of Alexander Gunn, in which the veil is artistically raised, dis-



ing very beautifully and with artistic skill. It was not known, even to his most intimate friends, that Mr. Gunn ever wrote more than an occasional letter of friendship, and him he was himself unconsciously of any literary ability. This volume comes as a surprise. After his death three little notebooks were found among his effects. These, with some scattered scraps make up the volume. There is no attempt in the brief notes that introduce and explain the publication to appreciate the author. With a simplicity and suppression of sentiment that must have been difficult, considering the nature of the lifelong friendship that existed between the author and the publisher, it is stated that Mr. Gunn was born in 1817; that he went from the stir and bustle of Cleveland in 1839 to Zoar "to escape the clamors and empty ambitions of the world"; that "he was then in the prime of life, with fine health, and had retired from active business, in which he had accumulated what he considered an ample fortune"; that visits to Zoar lengthened as the years went by, until "at last his life accidentally took root in the simple community and he made there a permanent home in the 'Hermitage,' a simple little cottage," which is the center of the amazing interest the volume discloses.

Thereafter there is nothing except that which Mr. Gunn, unpretentious of posthumous publication, set down in random notes or occasional letters. It is, in fact, an uncondensed autobiography, wherein the time honored traditions of this form of work are thrown to the winds. Mr. Whitney is to be congratulated for having saved his friend from the leveling hand of an editor who might have healed some literary defects, but would surely have spoiled the picture of a splendid man, treasured in short but pregnant sentences.

## NOT A SOURD SEEKER

Mr. Gunn was not sourd. He was very easy in his heart, and lived, if we may say so, on Easy Street, easelwise. The noise of the active town got on his nerves a bit. He would try how quiet it was amid the encircling hills that shut in the primitive township of Zoar—the place of rest. The Swabians so called it, because when they reached it they were very tired. Mr. Gunn went there because he was tired elsewhere. Strange thing—the man of cities found that when the rustic Swabians found him, he came, enjoyed it, and went. Soon his stay became longer than his absence. At last he "took root," and thereafter it was home—his very human, happy process. He melts into "the community."

"Here I am free from the envy the poor must feel toward the arrogance of pride and wealth, for here is a pure democracy. There is no shade of gradation in the social scale. I sit at table by the side of the coal miner and feel no shuddering; the ploughman is my friend and equal; when I think how rarely more simple his life is I feel that he is my superior."

This from his little four-page history of Zoar that opens the book.

But, after all, these are things that have been thought and said before. Ah, but in the final clause the individual note is distinctly heard, and thence onward you never lose it. But by Mr. Whitney's hand the pages, fragmentary as it all is, a kindly, genial presence, full of hearty human laughter and joy of life, with wistful undertones and sad smiles that ever and anon give way to beautiful enthusiasms.

Something of Thoreau and Burroughs, the nature worshiper, goes to the make-up of this retired merchant of Cleveland. Something, too, of Walt Whitman's deep humanity and masculine love of all beauty. He has a distinct kinship with Omar; even a cousinship with the unassuming, intellectual side of Falstaff. He vibrates with a quick sensitiveness to all the life around him, but his expression of his sensations is always chaste and simple, direct and natural.

The amiable agnosticism of his serious moments and a certain cheerful pantheism beautifully shade for him the riddle of the universe. In thinking of him the word "mellow" rises to the mind. He is fond of the word himself, and uses it in every shade of its range of meaning. Side by side, indeed, with the pleasure it derives from his notes and comments there constantly marches a curiosity as to the full measure of the man who made them. The more we read of the man, the more we want to know of the genial hermit of Zoar.

HE WAS COMPANIONABLE, THOUGH A RECLUSE.

Strange thing for a hermit, we picture him almost instantly as the most companionable of men. What he is to the leading lights of the rough spun Zorites in their isolated community he just as surely was to hosts of men of very different caliber.

Although his notes generally describe those people of the world outside Zoar by initials only, one plainly sees among the great number in the little pictures he has left the late Cornelius Vanderbilt, Mr. D. O. Mills, Mr. Crocker of California, "Dan" O'Connell of the Bohemian Club of San Francisco; Lawrence, the author of "Kashmir," now Secretary to Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India; Senator Mark Hanna, Grover Cleveland, Morton Frewen, Myron T. Herrick, Mrs. Jack Gardner, a few Bishops, Governor Todd, Sir William Van Horne, a few Lords and ladies, Duchesses and others, and William McKinley—all in a natural sort of pell-mell, coming and going in pageantry of palace and palace hotels. In all he was equally at home. Two of these journeys are described in the book.

That a man with so wide and fine an acquaintance as is disclosed in these revealed fragments should have successfully escaped publicity and notoriety, as he intentionally did, is to be recorded as a distinct achievement of personal dignity. One of the few regrets he seems to have suffered during his peaceful days was over the establishment of a newspaper in a town adjacent to Zoar, and the other over the intrusion of some sightseers into the sacred precincts of the Hermitage, which fronted the Via Sacra, in the slumberous village of his home.

But it was with this as with every other annoyance he had, which was usually obviated by the phrase, "I forgive everybody everything," and he soon forgot this near-by disturber of privacy.

GUNN A MASTER OF  
WORD PAINTING.

Whatever notes Alexander Gunn made

during the first ten years of his intimacy with Zoar, only one survives, namely, the little history of the colony already referred to. From 1839 on there is more of them. The village doling, the village scenes; the births, the deaths, the glory of the woods and fields in every season, are jotted down here with every sign of intimacy. The enduring excellence of his simple style leaps out at one from every page. His faculty of painting a picture—a clear cut cameo—in a few simple, direct and natural words, if one may adopt such a phrase—is wonderful.

In April, 1860, he writes: "Now sits in a storm of snow and wind. The windows rattle and all the gables and chimneys lend a noise to the roaring wind. The sleety snow, dashing against the windows, lulls me to sleep." In the morning all was white, but the birds, sturdily singing, refused to believe that winter was again. The distances are obscured by snow, which, before the blast, lies in clouds. The trees bend low under the wind."

Here is a reminiscence: "Obed, returning for the first time after his departure from home, can scarcely conceal the ecstasy he feels. I, too, remember the old days when I came home radiant and fresh. It was the end of May, a soft, warm evening. I can yet see the young leaves on the trees and feel my mother's arms around me and her kiss upon my face. These are the treasures of memory."

So we follow him around Zoar; through the sowing, the harvesting, the wine-making, the beer-brewing, the chicken raising, the troubled economic questions of the community. The chopping down of the ancient woods always meets with protest. Without order, save as they follow in date, the events are set down in these little pictures. Bits of pioneer history drift in. It is January 3, 1832. It snows and blows.

"Old Mike" told me to-day of the time when he came to Zoar among the first. His father was left behind sick and his mother, with her two children—Mike, aged 12, and a younger sister—came on through the woods alone. The wagoner, who had carried them from Pittsburgh, left them, as agreed, at Sandyville, three miles from this place, then a wretched settlement of log huts in the woods. It was a few days before Christmas, 1817.

"Mike" tells me how his mother sat down on a log and burst into tears. Far from home, in a strange land, a trackless wilderness, and no place to shelter her children! No wonder Mike says men were kinder in those days, for a man with bushy beard and butternut-colored clothes came up and asked what troubled her. She told him, and then he said, 'Can you spin?' and she said, 'Yes,' and he offered her a home until she should get settled with her own people."

The book of Ruth was so re-enacted in Zoar eighty odd years ago.

The stock panic of 1893 had made some difference in the value of his holdings, or, as would seem, it had plucked those who owed him money. He notes it vaguely: "I myself am a victim. Must I lose this, too?" And again:

"Pank in New York, stocks off; different here. Why should I ever leave the friendly shelter of these hills, these quiet days with calm skies? Without pride, to be always good and simple and friendly; to love and be loved, is not that enough?"

His gentle creed seems to have worked ad-

mirably for him. "Ten days later he is saying: 'I look up to the sky through the bare branches radiant with sunshine; the wind singing through the trees moves me like solemn music. I exult in my existence, forgetting care and poverty.'"

Of course it is "comparative poverty." He is wealthier than his Zoar friends, but those old friends whom he left in the cities have been piling up their wealth, and the contrast between his means and theirs is

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